

Former Maine Senate Majority Leader Chellie Pingree, author of the "Maine Rx Program," and national advocate for prescription drug relief, was slated to testify at the Ways and Means Committee hearing on the need for a Medicare prescription drug benefit on Wednesday, April 19, at 10:30 am. This afternoon, however, the Chairman of the Ways and Means Committee decided to deny her the right to appear as the Democrats' witness because she is a candidate for public office.

Rep. Stark stated: "By refusing to allow Chellie Pingree to testify before the Ways & Means Committee, the Chairman has denied our committee the opportunity to learn from a real expert. Chellie Pingree wrote the Maine Rx Program, a unique state level prescription drug plan in which the state would negotiate with pharmaceutical companies to get better deals on prescription drugs for seniors. While that plan is currently tied up in court because of challenges by the drug industry, Maine is providing a drug benefit for low-income seniors. In addition to her work in Maine, Ms. Pingree travels with seniors by bus to Canada to help them obtain lower cost prescriptions. These experiences are directly relevant to our work on a Medicare drug benefit for the nation and she should have the opportunity to share them with the committee."

Rep. Stark continued: "Whenever members of Congress testify before the Ways and Means Committee, they are candidates for public office. Just last week, for example, we had members of Congress who testified before the Human Resources Subcommittee and that was perfectly acceptable to the Chairman."

Rep. Stark concluded: "Chellie Pingree has challenged the pharmaceutical industry head on, which is exactly what we'll have to do to get a meaningful prescription drug benefit for all seniors. She has testified nationwide on Maine's efforts to provide prescription drug coverage for seniors and is widely recognized as an expert on the subject. I am truly sorry and embarrassed that the Chairman denied her the chance to share her knowledge with us simply because she is also running for office. Last time I checked, we encouraged public service in our country."